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ABSTRACT

The essays contained in this document, which launches the University of Georgia Education Initiative, attempt to address Georgia's need for increased literacy in realistic and constructive terms. Taken together, these essays constitute an agenda for action--a challenge to all those who wish to provide Georgians with the quality education they deserve. After an introduction by Alphonse Buccino, the following five papers are presented: (1) "Preschool Literacy Development in Georgia" (Stephen White); (2) "Literacy Development in Georgia's Elementary Schools" (JoBeth Allen); (3) "Literacy Development in Georgia's Middle and Secondary Schools (Donna Alvermann); (4) "Adult Literacy Education in Georgia" (Thomas Valentine); and (5) "The Social and Political Dimensions of Literacy" (Joel Taxel). (KEH)

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A More Literate Georgia

An Agenda for Action

A Report By The
Dean's Literacy Task Force

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A More Literate Georgia

An Agenda for Action

A Report By The
Dean's Literacy Task Force

College of Education
The University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia

November 15, 1990

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Office of Communication and Publication of the College of Education, The University of Georgia, Athens.

November 15, 1990

The University of Georgia

Office of the President

November 15, 1990

Fellow Georgians:

Without question, our state has a deep and longstanding illiteracy problem. Although Georgia produces some of the finest minds in the nation, the statistics on adult illiteracy and high school dropouts are staggering. Unless steps are taken to confront these problems, the future economic and social well-being of the state clearly is in jeopardy.

The University of Georgia is committed to taking a leadership role in Georgia's continuing efforts to fight illiteracy by improving our system of public education. Through educational research and development, through the preparation of top caliber educators, and through our many and diverse service activities aimed at educational improvement and community development, the University will continue to bring its considerable resources to bear on the educational problems of our state.

A More Literate Georgia: An Agenda for Action is a collection of thought-provoking essays in which innovative ways for improving literacy are explored. It is our earnest hope that those who read these essays – whether policy-makers, educational leaders, or other concerned citizens – will be prepared to take decisive action in improving literacy in our state.

Charles B. Knapp

Charles B. Knapp
President

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INTRODUCTION

TOWARD A MORE LITERATE GEORGIA

Alphonse Buccino
Dean, College of Education

In recent years, the popular press has given a great deal of attention to America's illiteracy crisis. Countless articles and telecasts have expressed shock and dismay at the undeniable fact that millions of Americans lack the literacy skills they need to thrive in and contribute to our society. Everyone asks the same, obvious question: "How can this be so?" We live in a country with the resources to provide universal, publicly-funded schooling to all of our children—something envied by less developed nations. Books, magazines, and newspapers are more readily available and less expensive than they have been in most other eras. Free public libraries are within the reach of most Americans, and various governmental agencies provide printed information on a wide range of topics for little or no cost.

So why do we have illiterate Americans? No one can answer this question with certainty, but many are quick to assign blame. Some blame television, which diverts children from reading. Some blame telephones, which allow people to avoid written communication. Some blame families for failing to provide the discipline and moral support necessary for school success. Some blame social deterioration—in the form of increased crime and drug use among America's youth. But, first and foremost, people blame our schools and the teachers and administrators who work in our schools. Because of the illiteracy crisis and the growing fears that American students are being surpassed by the students of other developed nations, wild recriminations are launched against everybody's favorite scapegoat: America's educators.

So why do we have illiterate Americans? No one can answer this question with certainty, but many are quick to assign blame.

In response to what is perceived as a national crisis, many states have introduced sweeping educational reforms. All too often, such reforms amount to little more than demanding that already hard-pressed educators somehow raise the educational standards of our schools. Seldom are such reforms based on a vision of how education can be improved; seldom are such reforms accompanied by concrete and substantive recommendations that will help educators get the job done. In essence, most educational reforms take the form of policy-makers and educational leaders giving teachers a single message: "Jump higher, and we don't care how."

For those of us in the College of Education, the improvement of education is not an emergency enterprise, but a way of life. We devote our energies, not to screaming about problems, but to crafting solutions. True educational improvement rarely comes from panicked, knee-jerk reactions spawned by a crisis mentality. Rather, worthwhile and long-term solutions to educational problems are the result of deliberate action based on careful reflection and sound scholarship.

1990 is an important year for the College of Education, because it marks the beginning of the University of Georgia's Education Initiative.The Initiative is committed to improving education in the state of Georgia in a variety of ways. Through our direct service activities, we will help local school districts in solving their own problems, work with government agencies and state offices to develop curricula and design stronger inservice programs, and assist the state's policy-makers in crafting long-range plans for the steady improvement of education in Georgia. Through the ideas generated from our research efforts, we will help to solve the pressing educational problems of our state and encourage policy-makers, educational leaders, and teachers to envision new possibilities for the education of all of our citizens. Through our teacher education programs, we will continue to produce educators skilled enough and committed enough to meet Georgia's present and future educational needs.

The essays included here represent an attempt to address Georgia's need for increased literacy in realistic and constructive terms. These essays are not about what we have done wrong, but rather about what we can do right.

It is fitting that we launch the University of Georgia Education Initiative with a document such as this, since literacy is the cornerstone of education. Children who become literate acquire an essential tool for success throughout their school careers. Those who fail to acquire literacy skills are doomed to school failure and, too often, to difficult adult lives. Illiteracy is a problem that goes well beyond the basic techniques of reading and writing; true literacy requires the ability to communicate diverse and complex information and to comprehend not only simple messages but also meaning at a higher level. The essays included here represent an attempt to address Georgia's need for increased literacy in realistic and constructive terms. These essays are not about what we have done wrong, but rather about what we can do right. The authors have abandoned the normal conventions of academic writing in an attempt to provide policy-makers and educational leaders in our state with useful information in a usable form. Taken together, these essays constitute, as the title states, an agenda for action – a challenge to all those who wish to improve our state by providing Georgians with the quality education they deserve.

PART 1

PRESCHOOL LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA

Stephen White, Assistant Professor
Department of Elementary Education

Young children – whether at home, in family day care, or in institutional child care or preschool programs – need to be engaged in activities that foster their social, emotional, and intellectual development. Recent research in early childhood education and literacy development indicates that all children must be involved in experiences with reading and writing as they initially acquire language. The development of literacy and language during the preschool years is considered to be the cornerstone upon which social, emotional, and intellectual abilities are built. Currently, educators in the field of child development, early childhood education, and literacy development are advocating preschool programs which are **developmentally appropriate** for the preschool child. These programs help children take an active part in their own learning, provide interesting and involving classroom experiences, and build on children's previous understandings and experiences. This essay will discuss preschool programs, current views of preschool literacy development, the preschool literacy program, and the role of parents in the development of literacy.

Preschool Programs

In recent years there has been overwhelming evidence which shows that preschool education does make a difference in the future school success of all young children. Longitudinal studies have clearly shown that children who begin school behind their peers tend to fall further and further behind each year. While the majority of children from upper and middle class families in Georgia are enrolled in some type of preschool program, only four out of 10 Georgia four-year-olds in families earning less than $10,000 are enrolled. The federal Head Start program is intended to reduce this gap in access to early childhood education, but low funding levels for the program allow it to serve only a fraction of eligible poor children. **As of 1985, there were only 14.8 out of 100 poor children enrolled in Head Start in Georgia. There is no Head Start supplement provided by the state nor does the state provide state funds for preschool programs.**

In recent years there has been overwhelming evidence which shows that preschool education does make a difference in the future school success of all young children.

Presently, there is a heightened awareness among legislators, parents, and education professionals of the need for equal access to preschool programs for all children in Georgia. The provision of preschool programs for all four-year-olds in Georgia is a key issue in current political campaigns across the state. There are successful efforts in this direction presently underway. Carollton City School system operates a prekindergarten program for four-year-olds in cooperation with West Georgia College. We need to continue to develop cooperative efforts such as this one to provide preschool programs for *all* children in Georgia. Local school districts can provide leadership in bringing together educators, private providers, and social service agencies to develop effective community-wide programs. Business leaders in every community must continue to speak out strongly for and lend support to public policies that foster early childhood education.

Of critical importance is meeting the needs of children who have disabilities.

Of critical importance is meeting the needs of children who have disabilities or are considered to be at risk of acquiring them due to factors such as prenatal drug abuse, low birth weight, premature birth, or poverty. In the late 1980s, an estimated 496,000 of Georgia's children younger than five lived in poverty. Recent federal and state efforts to deliver coordinated, family-centered services to disabled or at-risk infants and toddlers are first steps in avoiding the developmental delays that can emerge as these children grow. For example, efforts such as a program in Williamsburg, Virginia, for parents of premature or low birth weight infants has demonstrated that developmental delays can be reduced by teaching parents how to intellectually stimulate and support these children during infancy. Yet these services are not widely available to all children who are physically or intellectually handicapped or are at risk of acquiring learning disabilities. We need to expand early childhood programs in Georgia by supplementing the federal commitment to Head Start and providing funds for comprehensive early education programs. **The state of Georgia must also commit to full participation in the development of the infant and family programs and preschool programs for special-needs and high risk children under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and the Education for the Handicapped Act.**

Early childhood programs that involve parents, provide support and counseling to families, and contain a solid educational component make a difference in the ability of poor children to achieve. A central part of comprehensive early education programs is literacy development. As we see in the next section, literacy development is not just an academic skill to be acquired in school but an active process in which young children learn through interacting with parents, peers, and the environment around them.

Current Views of Preschool Literacy Development

Within the past two decades beliefs about learning to read and write have changed as the field of reading and language arts has been reconceptualized as "language and literacy." For many years it was believed that children's literacy development began as they entered school and instruction focused primarily on a set of skills identified as prerequisites for reading. These prerequisite skills are often referred to as "reading readiness" and have commonly been taught to all young children before they began a formal reading program in first grade. This method of teaching assumes that all children are fairly similar in their level of development when they come to preschool or kindergarten.

Educators now believe that literacy development does not begin with formal instruction when children enter school. Rather, children bring with them to school many concepts about literacy and certain competencies in oral language, writing, and reading. Literacy development is now viewed as beginning at birth and continuing into adulthood. When children have difficulty, the problem may not be immaturity or the lack of readiness skills but a lack of literacy-related experiences. This new perspective on early reading and writing development is known as emergent literacy. Emergent literacy implies an understanding of language and literacy where reading and writing are not regarded simply as cognitive skills to be learned. Instead, language and literacy skills develop together; for example, reading experiences influence oral language, and writing actually improves children's reading skills.

For many children in a literate society, early contacts with print are the beginning of a lifelong process of learning to read and write. Young children's literacy learning grows out of a wide variety of exposures to print. Children construct their knowledge about print and their strategies for reading and writing by experiencing reading and writing in many facets of their everyday lives. For example, oral language development is supported in everyday conversations with adults and other children; children learn how to express their thoughts and develop the needed language tools of words, sounds, sentence structures, and turn-taking. Some children are fortunate to be read to regularly and therefore experience books and the sights and sounds of written language from an early age. Some children begin "scribble writing" from the time they are old enough to hold a pencil or crayon. **We should be providing these experiences to all children in day care centers, in child development centers, in Head Start Programs, in preschools, and in prekindergarten programs.**

For many children in a literate society, early contacts with print are the beginning of a lifelong process of learning to read and write.

There are many successful efforts currently in place to provide literacy experiences to Georgia's young children. However, there are many day care centers, Head Start Programs, preschools and prekindergarten programs where teachers and childcare workers have not been formally trained in appropriate practices for providing literacy experiences. In preschool programs which are considered to be developmentally appropriate, literacy experiences are provided to children in meaningful ways, and efforts to communicate and coordinate these experiences with parents are made.

The Preschool Literacy Program

A priority in early childhood curriculum should be assuring that all children become capable and willing participants in the literate society of the classroom. The early childhood literacy program needs to adopt as its foundation functional, meaningful activities that involve reading and writing in a wide variety of ways. Reading and writing experiences at school should permit children to build upon their existing knowledge of language and literacy to further the development of their communication skills.

Young children need to be given opportunities to experiment daily with reading and writing.

Young children need to be given opportunities to experiment daily with reading and writing. Effective teachers read aloud to young children several times a day, introducing many types of books as well as frequently rereading children's favorites—just as many parents do. Children "pretend read" to each other, the teacher, and even to stuffed animals as a step in their literacy development. Therefore, a classroom library is essential. Literacy activities also include opportunities to read using environmental print such as signs, labels, or charts which are used to organize the classroom environment. Classroom "centers," such as hospital, post office, house, and puppet centers, can also encourage reading and writing activity. Written language experiences also need to be made available. Writing centers where children are encouraged to draw and write independently or with their teachers and peers provide opportunities for sharing and reading their writing. When signs made by teachers and students are posted, and where mailboxes, charts, schedules and signs in activities serve a functional purpose, both writing and reading are enhanced.

Inappropriate practices include academic skill drills, workbooks and worksheets and other activities that fail to take into account how oral and written language are learned naturally. When too much attention is focused upon isolated skill development or abstract parts of the reading and writing process, young children may experience difficulty in their literacy development. What is required is for teachers and administrators of programs for young children to be aware of appropriate practices for children in the early

stages of reading and the value of activities such as storybook reading and meaningful writing opportunities.

Teachers and childcare workers throughout the state need to be provided with opportunities to learn more about how language and literacy develop in preschool children in order to facilitate literacy and language development.

There are a number of training opportunities presently available to childcare workers and preschool teachers. These opportunities are provided by agencies such as the University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension Service, the Georgia State Department of Education, the Georgia Department of Human Resources, and the Georgia Preschool Association. These agencies provide inservice and training sessions on a regular basis. However, we need to coordinate our efforts to include appropriate emergent literacy training to childcare workers and preschool teachers throughout the state. Because many teachers of young children may not have access to present training programs, cooperative ventures between colleges and universities and local and state agencies which regulate childcare centers and preschools need to be explored. The role of literacy development in children's learning and suggestions for providing appropriate literacy experiences should be priorities in these training endeavors. Parents often provide these experiences for their preschoolers; we can learn from these literate households.

The Role of Parents in Literacy Development

Parents play a crucial role in the development of their children's literacy.

Families, as the "first educators," must lay the groundwork for learning. Parents play a crucial role in the development of their children's literacy and should encourage literacy at home and work with the schools as partners in their children's literacy development. We need to provide equal opportunities for all parents to be able to read regularly to their young children since the verbal interaction between adult and child during story readings has a major influence on literacy development. Writing materials such as papers, pens, pencils and markers as well as storybooks and other forms of print should be available in the home. Programs such as the national program Reading is Fundamental (RIF) help provide literacy materials such as storybooks to families who are unable to afford them. We can provide more literacy materials to Georgia preschool children by encouraging joint efforts such as business and school partnerships.

When parents provide a rich literacy environment at home, teaching reading and writing becomes easier for both the teacher and the child at school. It is a literacy rich environment – and not parents' education, occupation, or socioeconomic level – that is most highly related to children's

early reading. Getting parents involved in home literacy activities with their children is recognized as an important component of literacy development. Parent education programs can explain how literacy is learned in open-ended, interactive, and fun settings. **Parent education programs which explain the importance of parent involvement in young children's literacy development need to be made available to all parents of Georgia preschool children.**

The school is one agency which can take the responsibility for providing information to parents about the importance of literacy activities that take place in the home. A public school parent education program for parents of young children is currently being implemented in Harris County. Additional efforts to provide parent education programs could be provided throughout the state. Community organizations may also be able to offer parenting education that includes information to help children be successful in school. It is of the utmost importance to provide for parent involvement in Head Start and other programs which serve preschoolers considered to be at risk. There have been specific projects in other parts of the country, such as the Literacy/Curriculum Connections Project in Massachusetts, which can provide models for potential programs designed for parents of children considered to be at risk. Programs which target the parents of at-risk preschoolers may provide additional ways to reduce the risks for young learners before they begin their formal school experience.

Recommendations for Improving Preschool Literacy Development

We need to expand early childhood programs in Georgia.

- **We need to expand early childhood programs in Georgia** by supplementing the federal commitment to Head Start and by providing funds for comprehensive early education programs.

- **We should be providing appropriate literacy experiences to all children** in day care centers, in child development centers, in Head Start Programs, in preschools, and in prekindergarten programs.

- **Teachers and childcare workers throughout the state need to be provided with opportunities to learn more about how language and literacy develop** in preschool children in order to facilitate literacy and language development.

- **Parent education programs which explain the importance of parent involvement in young children's literacy development** need to be made available to all parents of Georgia preschool children.

PART 2

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA'S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

JoBeth Allen, Associate Professor
Department of Language Education

Most children in Georgia learn how to read during their elementary school years; some learn how to write. However, few children in Georgia actually become readers during their elementary years; fewer still become writers. What are we doing right? What is going wrong?

Most children in Georgia learn how to read during their elementary school years.

We are providing instruction for more children than at any time in history. We have poured more and more money into textbooks, workbooks, and teaching aids, remedying past inequities. We have a highly educated and dedicated force of elementary teachers, reading specialists, and administrators.

We have "reading materials" for every child, but few children have their own books. We have state-mandated time for reading instruction, but little time for actual reading—picking up a book and reading it for an extended period of time. We have workbooks for spelling, handwriting, grammar/English, and reading skills; but we have little time left after workbooking for reading and writing. We have a uniform pace of instruction that bores some, who mentally drop out, and fails others, who drop further and further behind their peers and eventually drop out. We have remedial service models that need reexamination.

Elementary education in Georgia is at a critical juncture. Through leadership from elementary school educators and from the Georgia Department of Education Early Childhood Division, several promising initiatives have begun or been proposed. This section will focus on five areas of practice and policy that have a direct impact on literacy development for Georgia's elementary school children. These are simple solutions that would have a dramatic effect. Literacy learners need the following:

1. Opportunities every day, for every child, to read real books;

2. Opportunities every day, for every child, to write for meaningful purposes;

3. Restructured remedial instruction that does not label, track, separate, and further retard literacy development;

4. Revised evaluation procedures that provide teachers ongoing information for literacy instruction and do not subject young children to inappropriate testing; and

5. Continuous progress without retention through elementary school so that all children view themselves as competent readers, writers, and learners.

Daily Opportunities to Read

We learn by doing. Children become readers by reading. Currently, most reading instruction in Georgia focuses on the development of isolated skills. Actual reading time is limited to an average of **seven minutes a day**, according to the recent Report of the Commission of Reading. The same report informs us that "Research suggests that the amount of independent, silent reading children do in school is significantly related to gains in reading achievement."

But books are not enough; children must also have time to read.

This report urges well-stocked classroom libraries so that children may read widely throughout the day. But books are not enough; children must also have time to read. Those children read the most who are already the best readers – those who finish their other work quickly and "earn" the right to read. The right to read books in school should be inalienable, a public guarantee to every child in Georgia.

The most promising development that may give children **time to read** and **books to read** is Special Instructional Assistance (SIA). Through Quality Basic Education reforms, the state has provided SIA money to school districts for kindergartens and first and second grades. The money is for **developmentally appropriate** instruction – instruction that fits the child as a learner, that provides equal learning experiences for all children, that deemphasizes workbooks and other isolated skill and drill activities. Because of SIA guidelines, teachers are spending less time directing workbook activities and more time actually reading and writing with children. They also have money to buy books for their classroom libraries, so that children can literally read all day long as they learn science, geography, fairy tales, etc. The SIA guidelines have also helped end damaging tracking systems that

have long perpetuated low literacy rates, especially among Georgia's poor and minority populations.

What more should be done? The SIA philosophy of developmentally appropriate instruction should extend to all elementary classrooms and should be fully funded. The expansion into second grade is currently threatened by the budget shortfall. There must be an unwavering commitment to this exemplary state-sponsored program which provides for the continuing education of teachers, increased individual attention through small class sizes, and guidelines that free children and teachers from meaningless workbooks and give them time for real reading, writing, and experiencing.

Daily Opportunities to Write

Most elementary teachers were not taught how to teach writing, and most are not avid writers themselves. They were trained to teach some of the components of writing – spelling, handwriting, grammar, sentence and paragraph formation – but not real writing. In many Georgia classrooms children are asked to copy or fill in blanks, but they rarely really write. Real writing occurs when a writer chooses something worth writing about, struggles to develop the idea and represent it on paper, and makes whatever changes are necessary so others can read it. As teachers allow and encourage daily opportunities for real writing, they teach the components of writing.

Most elementary teachers were not taught how to teach writing, and most are not avid writers themselves.

Georgia has several exemplary writing sites. The internationally recognized Foxfire teacher outreach program trains teachers to involve students as real writers from the earliest ages. The founder and teacher mentor of Foxfire, Eliot Wigginton of Rabun County High School, now works with teachers at elementary as well as secondary schools. Camden County and others have implemented Writing Projects. Other counties like Gwinnett, Newton, Rockdale, and Oconee have emphasized both reading and writing through Whole Language instruction: that is, having the actual reading and writing instruction children receive be from real books and meaningful writing experiences where language is kept whole, rather than broken in parts.

If all these good things are happening, what needs to be done? We need **continued commitment to inservice education**, so teachers can take courses, visit exemplary schools, attend professional meetings, and have a forum for sharing new ideas. For several years, the state has provided funds for teacher inservice; now these funds are in jeopardy. In addition, educators need to be able to use state funds flexibly. Many teachers would rather provide paper, pencils, and writing folders – the real tools of writers – than useless language

arts workbooks. Further, these funds could be used for computers to add wordprocessing to the writing curriculum. Currently, only children from wealthy homes and wealthy school districts have daily access to this valuable writing tool.

Restructured Remedial Instruction

Noted Stanford University professor Henry Levin recently summarized research about low-achieving readers, especially minority children, and the current practice of pulling them out of the classroom for remedial reading instruction year after year: **If you wanted to humiliate, embarrass, shame and subject these kids to failure, if you wanted them to have low self-esteem, if you wanted to disempower parents, you would do all the things we are currently doing.**

Most remedial and special education programs stigmatize young readers and writers by singling them out for special help. There is also a convincing body of research that concludes we actually provide less effective literacy instruction by removing children from the classroom, especially when they go to "small group" instruction of as many as 15 children, and the instruction does not match what the child is getting elsewhere. Further, students in some special education programs end up missing valuable classroom literacy instruction, rather than getting additional instruction that might accelerate their progress.

There are other models of remedial instruction. Throughout the country teachers are seeing dramatic results of a short-term, one-to-one tutorial called Reading Recovery. Children leave the RR program after an average of 15 weeks, and thereafter rarely need further remedial instruction. In other schools, remedial and regular classroom teachers are successfully teaming to provide in-class instruction for all students that actually serves to accelerate the reading and writing progress of low-achieving students. In Georgia, the SIA program is intended to replace current pull-out models of remediation. We need (1) careful study of other models and (2) full implementation of SIA.

Revised Evaluation Procedures

Elementary children in Georgia lose up to three weeks a year of instructional time to testing.

Elementary children in Georgia lose up to three weeks a year of instructional time to testing. They take IQ tests, standardized achievement tests, state criterion referenced tests (CRT), and locally mandated tests. Most of these tests are measures of word analysis, vocabulary, spelling, and other components of literacy. They are nothing like the real reading and writing

experiences children should be having. Educators agree that these paper-and-pencil measures are inappropriate for young children. In North Carolina, the state legislature has banned standardized testing in the primary grades. In Georgia, parents and educators worked together to replace the California Achievement Test with the Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Project (GKAP). The GKAP was written by educators, provides for ongoing rather than one-shot assessment, is tied very closely to effective instructional practices, and includes teacher training in the use of this comprehensive instrument.

What needs to be done? Again, we are moving in the right direction but need continued support. The state's Department of Education is working on a revised first grade assessment instrument that is similar to the GKAP and that reflects the principles of developmentally appropriate instruction in SIA classrooms. If the third grade CRT is then modified (perhaps with an actual writing component rather than parts of writing) to reflect current educational theory and practice, the state should specify that districts impose no other standardized testing on elementary children. Further, we should stop the detrimental practice of school-by-school and district-by-district comparisons of test scores. Test results should be used to improve education, not to embarrass teachers and learners.

Continuous Progress

Georgia has one of the highest dropout rates in the nation and, not coincidentally, has one of the highest retention rates. Retention at any grade level dramatically increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of school. Half of all students retained in public schools drop out; 90% of all students retained more than one year drop out. A large body of research shows no positive academic, emotional, or social advantages of having a child repeat a grade; retention more often reinforces academic failure and fosters emotional problems and social maladjustment. Further, retention is highly discriminatory; the majority of students retained are African-American males, a group seriously at risk in our state.

Half of all students retained in public schools drop out; 90% of all students retained more than one year drop out.

There is a strong and insidious relation between retention practices and the predominant reading instructional practices. Grade promotion in the majority of districts in Georgia is based on progress in the basal reading textbook. Students are retained if they have not "passed" a predetermined and uniform level. "Passing" the level rarely involves reading in its true sense —selecting a book, reading it, discussing it with someone else who is interested in it. Rather, each textbook company provides pages and pages (30 in one third grade end-of-level test) of workbook test items that are sup-

posed to measure reading skills. Perhaps they do, but they do not measure reading.

And even if these tests did measure reading, what kind of message does this retention practice give a child?

> *"Josh, you've learned a lot this year, and I know you've really enjoyed all the interesting stories you've read. But you didn't pass* Parades, *so you can't go on to second grade. You'll be in first grade again, reading the same books in the same order again, while all of your friends go on to second grade."*

Reading becomes a hated and rigid yardstick of success and self-worth, rather than an empowering route to personal development.

Georgia must stop retaining students in elementary school.

Georgia must stop retaining students in elementary school. We can replace our current retention policies with a continuous progress model. Abolishing retention must be accompanied by ongoing inservice education on developmentally appropriate literacy instruction; the current basal textbook structure is tied to grade level promotion and is not appropriate as a single methodology. Teachers need more flexible instructional options in order to guarantee actual continuous progress instead of just "moving kids along."

The Texas Board of Education recently voted unanimously to forbid retention of students before first grade. Kentucky has mandated ungraded primaries (continuous progress in kindergarten through third grade) by the year 1992. Georgia State Superintendent of Schools Werner Rogers has called for ungraded primaries, with continuous progress and no retention, statewide by the year 1995.

Recommendations for Improving Literacy Development in the Elementary School

Georgia is moving in the right direction. The Special Instructional Assistance (SIA) emphasis on developmentally appropriate instruction in the primary grades, textbook adoption guidelines that include classroom sets of real books, an appropriate kindergarten assessment procedure, and Werner Rogers' call for an end to retention would make us national leaders in elementary school literacy education. So what would these changes cost us?

- **Daily Opportunities to Read.** Money for classroom libraries could come almost entirely from money currently spent on inappropriate and excessive workbooks and dittos.

- **Daily Opportunities to Write.** Money for paper, pencils, writing folders, and even computers could come from money currently spent on inappropriate language arts workbooks.

- **Restructured Remedial Instruction**. Chapter 1 money can and is being used in other states on model programs such as Reading Recovery and in-class accelerated learning.

- **Revised Evaluation Procedures**. Districts could save thousands of dollars a year by reducing inappropriate standardized testing.

- **Continuous Progress**. Retention is very expensive; that money could be channeled into inservice on developmentally appropriate instruction that insures continuous progress. In fact, funds for **inservice education** and **preservice education** are vital to each of these endeavors.

We cannot estimate a dollar amount for this literacy initiative; it appears that Georgians might actually save money by redistributing it for more effective literacy policies. We can only point to the devastating costs of illiteracy and say "We can't afford **not** to provide the very best literacy education for all of Georgia's young people."

PART 3

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN GEORGIA'S MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Donna Alvermann, Professor
Department of Reading Education

The educational reform initiatives of the late 1980s, which are still with us today, have focused a large share of their attention on the literacy development of students enrolled in middle and secondary level schools. Hailed by some as milestones in American education and by others as political rhetoric, one reform document after another has called for improvements in early- and late-adolescents' reading and writing proficiencies.

Students who have the basic skills but choose not to use them to read and write for enjoyment or to learn other subject matter are no better off than those who lack the skills altogether.

But what exactly are those proficiencies? Basic skills are a part; however, both *skill* and *will* are required if literacy instruction is to have a lasting and useful impact on an individual's life. Students who have the basic skills but choose not to use them to read and write for enjoyment or to learn other subject matter are no better off than those who lack the skills altogether.

Developing Literacy in Middle and Secondary Schools

The notion of developing the will, or motivation, to apply what is known about reading and writing to other areas of the curriculum is a central theme in this essay, but its importance extends far beyond. In fact, the underlying goal of most literacy instruction at the middle and secondary school levels is to enable students to learn the content of their coursework – hence, the popularity of the phrase, "reading and writing across the curriculum."

How much reading and writing actually go on in middle and secondary school classrooms has become the focus of much debate lately. Textbooks, mostly in class sets of single adoptions, head the list of instructional materials in middle and secondary school classrooms. In many classrooms the textbook *is* the curriculum and the primary source of information. This is regrettable given the positive effect that classroom libraries, stocked with all kinds of topic-related literature, can have on students' learning and attitudes toward reading and writing.

Although textbooks dominate the instructional scene, it appears that teachers provide students with little instruction in how to read their contents, preferring instead to use the texts as "safety nets" – something for students to fall back on and to use as supplements to class lectures. The frequency with which students do, in fact, depend upon their textbooks for learning may be far less than assumed. According to the latest reading and writing studies conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, 61% of the 8th-graders and 56% of the 12th-graders reported reading a total of 10 or fewer pages each day from their textbooks, and this was for schoolwork done across all curriculum areas. Equally distressing is the fact that the majority of these same students were rarely asked to respond in writing to what they had read, despite the fact that writing-to-learn is known to be an effective approach to content instruction.

If students are doing very little reading and writing related to schoolwork, how likely are they to pick up a book to read for enjoyment?

If students are doing very little reading and writing related to schoolwork, how likely are they to pick up a book to read for enjoyment? Again, according to the latest estimates, the trend continues for middle and secondary school students to do significantly less reading than their elementary counterparts. Motivating students to become life-long readers and writers is a challenging and, at times, frustrating task. Outside interests and time spent viewing television escalate as students progress through the grades.

However, as educators committed to developing early- and late-adolescents' interests in reading and writing, there are several things we can do. One, we can acknowledge students' developing social awareness and needs. Holding discussions prior to and following literacy activities can enhance students' interests in responding to and learning from texts that they have either read or created. Group discussions stimulate thinking. The notion that thinking must originate within individuals (and only after that is it ready to be shared socially) has given way in recent times to the belief that some of our best thinking can result from a group's collective effort.

Two, we can ensure that middle and secondary school students view the process of "becoming literate" as having value and meaning to them on a personal level. When students are encouraged to read for total immersion, for the pure pleasure that comes from losing one's self in a good story, or to write on a topic for an audience of their own choosing, there is little chance they will equate passing state competencies in reading and writing with the real acts of reading and writing.

Three, we can provide time for classroom teachers and media specialists to meet and plan instructionally relevant ways to motivate students to read and write. Visits to the school media center can put students in touch with information delivered in a variety of interesting formats, all aimed at encouraging them to become life-long readers and writers.

Making surface changes in the way students are encouraged to read and write is a start. The next step is to make certain that we assess students' literacy skills in a manner that is compatible with the way we teach them. When multiple-choice tests are used to assess reading and writing proficiencies, students who have been taught to value the process approach to reading and writing have little opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned. For example, students who have learned the value of brainstorming, planning, drafting, sharing, revising, and editing—all parts of the writing process—have no way of demonstrating their knowledge of writing if the sole measure of achievement is a standardized multiple-choice test. On the other hand, when writing proficiency is assessed through actual writing samples, students are given the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned about the writing process.

In summary, when considering the importance of skill and will to the development of literacy at the middle and secondary school levels, it is important to keep in mind that we know much more about *what* needs to be done in order to help students become skilled, self-motivated learners than *how* practitioners, teacher educators, and policy-makers might collaborate in the process. This qualifier aside, an attempt is made here to define some areas in which Georgians are making exemplary progress in middle and secondary school literacy education as well as some areas in which much work remains to be done.

Literacy Efforts in Georgia's Middle and Secondary Schools

In the Southeast, in general, there is reason to be guardedly optimistic about middle and secondary school students' literacy development. The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that, although average reading performance in this region continues to lag behind that of the other regions in the country, by the time students reach 12th grade the gap on the proficiency scale has been reduced considerably. Another indicator that staying in school pays off is the finding that at-risk minority students significantly narrow the gap between themselves and non-minority students by the time they reach 12th grade. What is worrisome, however, is the number of students who drop out of school and thereby miss the opportunity to "catch up" with their peers nationwide.

Georgia continues to lead the way in developing the concept of middle school education. All candidates applying for initial certification in middle school education must have a minimum of one course each in the teaching of reading and writing in content areas. The University of Georgia's middle

Georgia continues to lead the way in developing the concept of middle school education.

school faculty is in the final stages of obtaining approval for a doctoral program in middle school education. This program, which will be one of the first of its kind in the nation, will contain a strong literacy component.

Appreciation for literature is fostered through several state level meetings in which noted authors of children's and young adult books are invited to speak. Several hundred middle and secondary school students in the state of Georgia enter an annual creative writing contest sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English. Finally, high school students who have shown potential in writing are invited to attend the Governor's Honors Program in Valdosta each summer. All of these activities are geared to instill within early- and late-adolescents a love and respect for reading and writing.

Just as there are reasons to be optimistic, there are also reasons to despair. According to the last report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the writing proficiencies of middle and secondary school students in the Southeast are significantly below those of their peers who live in other regions of the country.

Although literacy achievement alone cannot account for the poor showing in graduation rate, it most certainly is one of the key factors.

The state of Georgia ranks low out of all the states in the number of students who graduate from public high schools. Although literacy achievement alone cannot account for the poor showing in graduation rate, it most certainly is one of the key factors. It is difficult, if not impossible, to sort out the many other factors that lead to this dismal situation.

Still, with the emphasis on learning from text nationwide, it is puzzling that Georgia remains one of the few states that does not require all of its secondary teacher education majors to take at least one course in the teaching of reading in content areas as a prerequisite for initial certification. In Georgia, only secondary students who are majoring in English education are required to take such a course.

Another area of concern involves the type of assessment devices used to measure students' proficiency in reading and writing at the middle and secondary school levels. Reading measures that include passages of one or two paragraphs in length do not represent the kinds of reading tasks middle and secondary school students are asked to complete. Current reading measures rely primarily on a multiple-choice format, whereas in a classroom setting, students are required to answer open-ended questions, to write essays, to draw comparisons and contrasts, and so on. A further problem with the current reading assessment is its disregard for variations in students' background knowledge. Without an understanding of, and an adjustment for, the differences in students' prior experiences, any measure of reading is likely to be biased.

Although Georgia's writing assessment is geared toward measuring the writing process and thus is a step in the right direction, the types of tasks it requires of students are at odds with developing in them the motivation to write for enjoyment and learning across the curriculum. Asking students to write an impromptu theme on a topic of the test maker's choosing and for an audience of unknown graders is incompatible with the kinds of experiences that many students have had under the direction of a writing process teacher.

Recommendations for Improving Literacy Development in Middle and Secondary Schools

The following recommendations are made in the hopes that they might serve as departure points for discussion in a collaborative effort involving practitioners, teacher educators, and policy makers in the state of Georgia. They are not meant to be prescriptive, though the form in which they are written might suggest otherwise.

- Textbooks are by far the most pervasive feature of middle and secondary school classrooms. Expecting students to learn from their textbook assignments requires that they have both the skill and will to do so. For this to occur, their teachers must be prepared to teach reading and writing **functionally**—i.e., teachers must be able to provide students with the literacy skills needed to make sense of the text or other materials they have been assigned to read. **Therefore, it is recommended that all secondary education majors seeking initial certification be required to take a minimum of one course in the teaching of reading and writing in the content areas.**

- Current research supports the teaching of reading and writing using a process approach. Advocates of this approach stress the need for assessing students in a manner that is compatible with the way they are taught. **Therefore, a second recommendation is that the state of Georgia evaluate its assessment programs in reading and writing at the middle and secondary school levels to determine if the tests reflect current and recommended practices in literacy development.**

- The current emphasis on teaching basic literacy skills has deflected attention from the need to develop, through discussion and other means, students' higher-order thinking skills and their enjoyment of reading and writing for personal reasons. Often, teachers find themselves "teaching to the test" rather than implementing what they believe is "best practice" in their classrooms. To counteract the ten-

The current emphasis on teaching basic literacy skills has deflected attention from the need to develop, through discussion and other means, students' higher-order thinking skills and their enjoyment of reading and writing for personal reasons.

dency for tests to drive instruction, **a third recommendation is that teachers be accorded more decision-making powers in the areas of curriculum and assessment.**

PART 4

ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION IN GEORGIA

Thomas Valentine
Associate Professor, Department of Adult Education

Every Georgian eventually must come to terms with the fact that our state has one of the worst adult illiteracy problems in the nation. Whenever adult literacy has been measured in this country—and it has been measured repeatedly using many different research methodologies and many different definitions of literacy—the state of Georgia is ranked very near the bottom of the list.

The reasons for our persistent illiteracy problem are complex and difficult to isolate. When native Georgians are asked to speculate on the causes of the state's illiteracy problem, the most common response is "History." A history of slavery and inequality, in which large segments of the population were systematically denied access to education. A history of low investment in public education, which has extended many of the inequalities of the past into the present. A history of a turbulent and uncertain state economy that has led Georgia's policy-makers to neglect the needs of education in favor of the pressing problems of governmental and industrial survival.

Whether or not these speculations about the origins of illiteracy are accurate is, in a certain sense, rather unimportant. As a forward-looking state with an ever-vulnerable economy, we need to come to grips with our present reality: For some reason, Georgia's adults are considerably less educated than adults in most other states. Less than 60% of our adult population has a high school diploma; Georgia ranks 43rd of the 50 states in the nation in terms of high school completion. Although we have recently made strides in public education, our high school dropout rate continues to be an embarrassment; we rank 49th of the 50 states. Although we have an excellent system of public and private higher education institutions, the percentage of our population that goes on to college is disconcertingly low; again, we rank 49th of the 50 states.

As a forward-looking state with an ever-vulnerable economy, we need to come to grips with our present reality: For some reason, Georgia's adults are considerably less educated than adults in most other states.

We simply cannot afford to continue squandering the state's human resources. Every Georgian who fails to finish high school reduces our state's ability to support the workforce needs of existing and potential industries. Every Georgian who lacks the literacy skills necessary for informed voting makes our democratic system just a little less participatory than it was de-

signed to be. Every Georgian who enters adulthood lacking basic skills makes the well-being and advancement of one family in this state just a little more difficult. And every illiterate Georgian serves as a living condemnation of our state's educational and social system and provides tacit support for those outside the state who would characterize Georgia as "backward."

When illiterate adults become literate, or when high school dropouts return to finish school, they gain the means of more fully participating in our society.

Although illiteracy bears a marked relationship to poverty and crime, it would be difficult to argue that illiteracy is the root cause of the many social and economic problems that currently beset our state – problems such as rural poverty, urban decay, overcrowded prisons, and an expanding drug problem. Illiteracy, like poverty and crime, is a symptom of something deeper, of something very wrong in American society. However, unless legislators and educators in Georgia can identify the basic causes of illiteracy – and no one in the world has been able to do that with anything approaching certainty – they have little choice but to deal with the symptoms directly. Adult literacy education is an investment in the people our society has left behind. When illiterate adults become literate, or when high school dropouts return to finish school, they gain the means of more fully participating in our society. They also gain a sense of control over their lives, and over the lives of their children, that they never had before.

It is tempting to believe that the best way to address our adult illiteracy problem is to focus our resources on the K-12 system, thereby preventing new illiterates. However, such a belief is effectively shattered by both demographic trends and family dynamics. With the passing of the baby boom, we find ourselves with a large proportion of our population beyond the reach of the K-12 system but with most of their adult lives still ahead of them. Furthermore, children raised by undereducated parents are far less likely to succeed in school – despite the best efforts of our public school educators.

For the sake of all of our futures, Georgia needs to take better care of its people than it has done in the past. As a state, we have only two choices. We can accept our adult illiteracy problem as the inevitable outcome of our past, resign ourselves to the fact that illiteracy will always be with us, and, through our complacency and lack of decisive action, continue to live with the reality that we are a notoriously undereducated state. Or we can step up our adult literacy efforts in such a way as to increase literacy in Georgia, thereby reaping the individual, social, and economic rewards that, given our illiteracy rate, are now unlikely to come our way.

Current Adult Literacy Education Efforts

Adult literacy education in Georgia is a severely underfunded enterprise. There are well over two million adults who have not finished high school living in our state. In one recent fiscal year, the total budget for publicly sponsored adult literacy programs – consisting of federal, state, and local contributions – was just over four million dollars. The arithmetic is simple: Adult educators are expected to meet the educational needs of low-literate Georgians for approximately $2 per person – only 71 cents of which is provided by state and local governments. Needless to say, with so little money available to recruit and teach adult students, only a fraction of those who could benefit from literacy education actually receive it. In any given year, public adult literacy programs in Georgia reach about 2% of their intended audience.

In many respects, it is admirable that adult educators can do even that. Each year, the basic educational needs of the nearly 50,000 adult students who enroll in our programs are handled by no more than 1,000 teachers – fewer than 50 of whom are employed full-time. Adult literacy educators work under conditions that most K-12 educators would not tolerate. It is not unusual to find adult educators working alone or in pairs, carving out instructional space wherever they can find it – in church basements, storefronts, community centers, and classroom trailers no longer considered fit for K-12 education. Adult students must share books with one another – and they are seldom permitted to take such books home – because there are simply not enough to go around. Working without the support staff common to other educational institutions in Georgia, adult educators are left largely to their own resources; they are expected not only to teach, but to develop curriculum materials, recruit students, maintain records, counsel students, and administer tests.

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How do adult educators, the vast majority of whom are employed part-time, manage to meet such expectations? Not surprisingly – and through no fault of their own – many find that they simply cannot do everything they are expected to do. When they devote their energies to innovative teaching, recruitment suffers and enrollment drops. When they devote time to record-keeping or testing or counseling, students engage in individual work with little supervision. Seldom if ever do adult educators find time for curriculum development; as a result, they are forced to rely far too heavily on commercially published instructional materials of questionable relevance to the needs of adult learners.

It is a credit to Georgia's adult literacy educators that, despite these adverse working conditions, they somehow get the job done. Our programs

do not thrive, but they survive and continue to provide a valuable service to adult students motivated enough to learn under less than ideal circumstances. Every year, thousands of adult Georgians earn a high school diploma. Every year, tens of thousands increase their literacy skills and thus their abilities to confront the literacy demands they face as parents, workers, and citizens.

Administrative reforms over the past few years have substantially strengthened state officials' ability to manage the delivery of adult literacy education. Until recently, the delivery system was badly fragmented, with public funds for literacy programs dispersed through some 90 school districts in the state. With the creation of the Department of Technical and Adult Education, this cumbersome structure was replaced with a network of 36 service delivery areas roughly congruent with the service areas of the state's technical institutes. Each of these service areas has a fiscal agent and a local director (usually housed in the area technical institutes) who work under the programmatic supervision of the state Office of Adult Literacy Programs. For the first time in Georgia's history, there is the potential for truly concerted, statewide improvements in the area of adult literacy education. The Office of Adult Literacy Programs is aware of that potential, and has worked energetically to improve adult literacy education in Georgia through special efforts directed at program management, recruitment, staff development, and innovative programming.

One can sum up the realities of adult literacy education in Georgia in very few words. We have an overwhelming number of adult citizens with a pressing need for literacy education. We have a cadre of skilled and experienced adult educators who are not afraid to work under difficult conditions. We have an administrative network, headed by the staff at the Office of Adult Literacy Programs, that is both capable and willing to work for program improvement and expansion. What we do not have, however, are the basic resources needed to offer either the quantity or quality of programs necessary to make a meaningful impact on adult illiteracy in Georgia.

We are losing ground even in relationship to those neighboring states to which we are most often compared and with whom we compete for economic development.

Most states in the nation are dramatically outdistancing us with respect to improving literacy. We are losing ground even in relationship to those neighboring states to which we are most often compared and with whom we compete for economic development. Consider these facts:

- Georgia has more illiterates than either Alabama or South Carolina. Georgia has 2.02 million adults who lack a high school diploma; Alabama has 1.31 million and South Carolina has 1.18 million.

- Georgia has a worse dropout rate than Alabama or South Carolina. Our dropout rate is 39%, Alabama's is 25%, and South Carolina's is 35%.

- Each year, Georgia provides literacy education to 2.1% of its adults who lack high school diplomas; Alabama reaches 3.1% and South Carolina reaches 5.8%.

- In a recent budget year, Georgia's state and local contributions to adult literacy education amounted to $1.43 million; Alabama spent $2.27 million and South Carolina spent $3.96 million.

- In that same budget year, Georgia's state and local governments spent approximately $34 for every enrolled adult student. Alabama spent $55 and South Carolina spent $58 (while in many other states, this figure substantially exceeds $100).

Georgia is losing its struggle against adult illiteracy. In all but 30 of our 159 counties, more than half of the adults lack high school diplomas. Each year, we gain more than five new high school dropouts for every one adult who returns to school and earns a high school diploma. Despite the best efforts of adult educators, the number of undereducated adults in our state is steadily increasing each year, and we can expect this trend to continue until we, as a state, devote more of our resources to adult literacy education.

Recommendations for Improving Adult Literacy Education in Georgia

In these times of budget cutbacks, it might seem foolhardy to recommend increased expenditures for adult literacy education in Georgia. However, a careful examination of our adult illiteracy problem leads to one inevitable conclusion: Until our policy-makers decide to make adult literacy education a funding priority, Georgia's illiteracy problem will get worse instead of better. The consequences of adult illiteracy are severe enough to warrant substantial budgetary consideration. Most states have found that federal funding for adult literacy education can support only a fraction of the needed services; many states, including several Southern states with illiteracy problems not unlike those of Georgia, have implemented full-scale literacy initiatives, usually under the direct sponsorship of the governor's office.

Until our policy-makers decide to make adult literacy education a funding priority, Georgia's illiteracy problem will get worse instead of better.

Unless Georgia's legislators decide to establish stable funding substantial enough to address our enormous adult illiteracy problem—whether from existing revenues or, perhaps, in the form of a fixed percentage of the annual

proceeds from the proposed state lottery – we cannot reasonably expect our efforts to have a significant impact. Such funding is not hard to justify. Money spent on adult literacy education is not charity; it is a sound investment in the state's economic and social well-being.

The state can expect dramatic returns on such an investment. Increased funding will allow the Office of Adult Literacy Programs, in collaboration with local programs, to introduce carefully planned and well-managed changes into adult literacy education. Some of the changes that deserve careful consideration follow.

- **Expansion of Programs through the Development of Innovative Recruitment Strategies.** If our budget permits us to increase the size and number of adult literacy programs in the state, we will need to devote increased attention to developing innovative recruitment strategies. Given resource limitations, we have not yet been able to devote enough energy to gaining an understanding of the people whom our adult literacy programs are supposed to be serving. From the inside of a state government office or a university classroom, the reasons why undereducated adults should participate in literacy programs seem patently obvious; however, for an undereducated adult, for whom school has been a negative experience that has yielded little personal benefit, those reasons are far less apparent. We need carefully conceived research to uncover the basic motivations for participation in literacy programs, the reasons some eligible adults choose not to participate, and the types of programs that would appeal to different types of learners. Such research would have profound implications not only for promoting programs but for designing more effective approaches to adult literacy education.

Low-literate adults are not wayward children who have strayed from our classrooms; they are full-grown men and women who face the literacy demands of everyday life – demands often associated with their roles as parents, workers, and citizens.

- **An Increase in the Number of Full-Time Adult Literacy Educators.** For too long, adult literacy education in Georgia has attempted to scrape by without full-time professional educators. The pool of talent in the state is substantial, but, owing to the basic needs for a living wage and job security, far too many of our best adult literacy educators leave the field for more stable employment. Although the commitment and skills of part-time teachers and literacy volunteers have done much to make up for the lack of full-time adult educators, adult literacy education in Georgia lacks a critical mass of full-time professionals who can expend the time and energy needed to make real progress in the state's efforts to reduce adult illiteracy.

- **The Development of Adult-Oriented Curricula.** Low-literate adults are not wayward children who have strayed from our classrooms; they

are full-grown men and women who face the literacy demands of everyday life – demands often associated with their roles as parents, workers, and citizens. To date, adult educators have lacked the resources necessary to develop curricula expressly designed to serve the learning needs of Georgia's adults. Until that is done, many programs will continue to use instructional materials and methods very like those used in the K-12 classrooms in which low-literate adults previously failed. Such a practice has predictably negative consequences for program recruitment, student retention, and learning motivation. Adult literacy education in Georgia needs to recognize the unique needs of adults and develop curricula that take those needs into consideration.

- **The Development of Diverse Program Models.** There is no single, best literacy program. Experience has shown that what works in large metropolitan areas might not work in small cities and almost certainly will not work in rural areas. Moreover, programs designed to meet the needs of native-born Americans cannot meet the needs of Georgia's increasing numbers of foreign-born adults. Local programs need the resources to develop programs that fit into the existing social and economic framework of their communities and that meet the expressed needs of local adult students.

Experience has shown that what works in large metropolitan areas might not work in small cities and almost certainly will not work in rural areas.

PART 5

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF LITERACY

Joel Taxel, Professor
Department of Language Education

Many readers may be puzzled by the title of this section. "What on earth," you ask, "is political or social about literacy?" Literacy, after all, is about reading and writing, matters that appear to have little to do with such concerns. In fact, the overwhelming majority of literacy experts and researchers take precisely this approach. Literacy, in their view, is a politically neutral, technical issue amenable to study by the methods of science. Such study is believed to have the potential to yield the best methods to teach learners of all ages to read and write. Any conceptualization of literacy as merely a set of skills and competencies, or reduction of literacy instruction to issues of technique and method, is inadequate. Although literacy obviously does involve questions about skills, competencies, methods, and techniques, it also calls into play questions that are profoundly social, moral, ethical, and political.

Although literacy obviously does involve questions about skills, competencies, methods, and techniques, it also calls into play questions that are profoundly social, moral, ethical, and political.

When definitions of literacy are examined from an historical perspective, it becomes clear that such definitions are not static and that estimates of the adequacy of the population's literacy have undergone significant shifts over time. In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the concept of "functional literacy," which has been defined as the possession of the practical competence necessary to complete the reading and writing tasks encountered in ordinary adult life.

Exactly what is practical competence and what is to be included under the heading of "reading and writing tasks encountered in ordinary adult life"? Does this refer to the ability to read traffic signs and menus and fill out simple applications and, say, census forms? Or does it mean the ability to read and follow the directions needed to put together a fluorescent light purchased at a hardware store, and perhaps the language proficiency required to write a letter of complaint when you discover that some key parts were not included in the box containing the fluorescent light? Or does functional literacy entail the ability to read an editorial in *The Atlanta Constitution* and then compose a letter to the editor expressing either support or outrage about the newspaper's position? Clearly, quite different skills are necessary

to carry out each of these tasks. Also apparent is a markedly different conception of the role of the citizen in a democracy if literacy is limited to reading menus and filling out census forms as opposed to reading *The Atlanta Constitution* and writing a letter to the editor. It is when issues of this sort are raised about the nature of literacy that the social and political dimensions of the term become readily discernible.

A conception of literacy as limited to basic, job-related survival skills is a far cry from one that envisions individuals engaged in reading and writing about the significant social and political issues of the day.

A review of some of the recent discussions of America's literacy crisis suggests that there is a survival quality to most definitions of functional literacy. That is, the definitions emphasize externally imposed, employment-related skills that seem more concerned with the bureaucratic requirements of everyday life than with a conception of literacy as having to do with personal development, self-expression, enjoyment, or the attainment of social and political goals. For example, the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education used only the "simplest test" of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension in concluding that 23 million Americans are functionally illiterate, a figure that included 13% of all 17 year olds and a staggering 40% of all minority youth. A conception of literacy as limited to basic, job-related survival skills is a far cry from one that envisions individuals engaged in reading and writing about the significant social and political issues of the day. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire extends the notion of literacy to include those qualities of human consciousness that have potential to change and to transform not only individuals and groups but society as well. Such a conception of literacy clearly requires standards well beyond those of the commission discussed above as it would necessitate skills and proficiencies that are creative, critical, and empowering. It also envisions the raising of questions about the content and form of literacy instruction that generally are given insufficient attention in debates about literacy.

This discussion suggests that literacy is a double-edged sword. That literacy has the potential to empower is apparent from the efforts of socially and politically powerful groups throughout our history to limit the spread of literacy out of fear that people would use it to challenge their rule. During the antebellum period, for example, there were strict prohibitions against teaching slaves to read, for it was understood that the knowledge of the "word" would render the slave "unfit" for a life of bondage. The more conservative side of literacy is revealed by the limited definitions of it discussed above and by recent historical studies that reveal that when dominant groups have promoted literacy in this country, they usually have done so to foster nationalism and to advance particular worldviews, laws, and printed regulations.

The notion that education can function as a conservator, a bulwark of the status quo, is troublesome because it contradicts basic tenets of how we view

ourselves as a people and as a nation. The first tenet, identified with Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, states an educated, enlightened citizenry is the best defense against tyranny and therefore is essential to the health of American democracy. Another tenet is the belief that schools are the great equalizers, the engines of social mobility. We have long been taught to believe that regardless of the socioeconomic status of our family of origin, our race, color, creed, or gender, we all begin with an equal chance to succeed and to share in the abundance of American life. The school thus is seen as a critical arena where those who make the required effort and demonstrate sufficiently high levels of achievement position themselves on the road to the American dream of comfort, success, and, for the truly distinguished, fame and fortune.

Most of us tend to accept or take for granted the facts our children encounter in, say, their social studies and science texts. Similarly, few of those enrolled in adult literacy programs stop to question the content of the materials used in those courses. After all, if this material were not correct it would never have gotten into the books in the first place. Nor are we likely to consider very seriously the possible effects that library books, both fiction and non-fiction, have on readers' developing or evolving perceptions of themselves, their community, their world, etc. Most of us are increasingly concerned about the abysmal quality of most television and films and the extent to which they rely on gratuitous sex and violence to attract and retain their audience. In contrast, we usually assume that what our children learn in school, or grown-ups learn in adult literacy programs, is what they need to know in order to "get on" in the world and to participate in a meaningful fashion in our society.

Recent curriculum research, however, suggests that rather than attempting to pass on a common culture, the "best that our society has to offer," schools instead are involved in the transmission of a "selective tradition" that reflects the existing social relations between groups in society. That is, schools confer preeminence on the culture, language forms, world views, historical and ideological perspectives of the dominant social groups, thus legitimating—as logical, natural, and/or the result of merit—the power, prestige, and status of these groups in society. At the same time, schools historically have slighted, ignored, and even denigrated the language, culture, literature, and history of subordinate groups such as women and African-Americans.

Schools historically have slighted, ignored, and even denigrated, the language, culture, literature, and history of subordinate groups such as women and African-Americans.

For example, virtually all of the textbooks used in the 19th century instructed girls to put aside their ambitions and to seek fulfillment in helping men achieve their goals. Women were to be modest, meek, and silent. Racial minorities, such as African-Americans, were presented as an inferior race deserving of the debased position they occupied in 19th century American

society. Labor unions, which challenged the often appalling conditions found in American factories of the time, were represented as un-American, even evil. Readers of these books also were taught to believe that poverty was the result of individual laziness, ineptitude, and willful misbehavior and that if escape from poverty was impossible, acceptance of one's place in the social order was presented as a duty to both society and to God.

These viewpoints are jarring to our modern sensibilities; they seem the product of a less enlightened era than our own. However, for the overwhelming majority of 19th century school children and their parents, such worldviews were as much a part of their common-sense view of reality as those contained in contemporary textbooks are to most of us today. This "selective tradition" provided legitimacy and support for the second class status of women and racial minorities and the hostility that greeted workers' attempts to organize labor unions. When one considers that these selective and subjective views of reality were presented as "objective" fact, the political functions of curriculum become startlingly apparent. Perhaps less apparent is the fact that a selective tradition continues to exist in our schools today.

While, for the most part, the biases of contemporary textbooks and trade literature are not nearly as overt as are those discussed above, biases nevertheless do continue and can take a number of forms. In children's fiction today, members of racial or ethnic minorities such as African-Americans too often are presented as secondary characters, are seen as being subservient to whites, are shown passively accepting victimization or prejudice, and often are isolated from their own cultural group and its traditions. For many, the lack of cultural authenticity in books about minority cultures is a source of grave concern.

Research also reveals that even though an increasing number of books have females and minorities as central characters, many teachers continue to stock their classroom libraries or choose to read aloud only books with white male protagonists.

Too many books continue to present girls and women in passive roles, as those who watch and have things done to or for them. In contrast, boys and men usually are seen as active, daring, and adventurous. One disturbing development in contemporary children's literature is the phenomenally popular romance series written for girls from their pre-teen years through high school. These formula-written books are void of literary value and rely on outdated sex-role stereotypes. In addition, these stories are set in a world where everyone is white and upper middle class.

Research also reveals that even though an increasing number of books have females and minorities as central characters, many teachers continue to stock their classroom libraries or choose to read aloud only books with white male protagonists. The clear, if unstated, message of such selections is that white males are more important than are females or children of color.

While to some this may seem a trifling concern and merely a reflection of "the way things are," it is critical to bear in mind that it is through the sort of modelling presented in books, films, and television that children and adults learn what it means to be a boy or girl, man or woman, black or white, etc. The nature of interactions among characters of various kinds in books, films, and television shows are among the important sources all of us draw upon as we formulate and revise rules that govern our social interaction and behavior. The underrepresentation of strong females or people of color from such materials sends clear signals about the expectations one should have about the appropriate behavior of members of these groups. Georgia has the potential to become a truly multicultural state, a place where women and men of all colors share in the planning, as well as living, of the future. Literacy can be an essential path to that future but only if our literacy instruction and materials represent people on equitable terms.

The books we read and offer to learners of all ages must be of the highest literary and artistic value. Readers need to have a wide and varied literary diet. They need books with characters that reflect the rich racial and ethnic diversity of American society, white as well as African-American, Native-American, Hispanic-American, Asian-American, etc. They need books that show girls and women engaged in the multitude of roles and endeavors that the women and girls of today are involved in (and this includes "traditional" roles). Children need books that show girls and women as active, adventurous risk takers, as well as nurturing; we also need books that show that it is desirable for boys and men to be loving and nurturing. Teachers need to have these books in their classrooms and read them to children. Parents need to purchase these books or borrow them from school or public libraries. **State textbook adoption committees need to be politically astute, sensitive, and committed to these principles.**

If most of us take for granted the content of the curriculum, we are even more likely to give scant attention to the form in which the content is presented. We tend to accept, for example, that the textbook is the best, perhaps only, way to present social studies or science information (and thereby ignore the wonderful and growing number of fiction and nonfiction tradebooks). Similarly, we have for too long assumed that basal readers are the only way to teach reading, thus ignoring the many exciting approaches to literacy instruction that are detailed elsewhere in this monograph. It is commonly accepted that in order to master the intricacies of our language's grammar, learners need to spend endless hours doing exercises on the parts of speech or diagraming sentences, etc., but a half century of research questions the wisdom of such practices.

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Such practices have been utilized for so long that they have a common-sense, "this is the way things are done," appeal to them, to teachers and

parents alike. However, like curriculum content, curriculum form has a social and political dimension that needs to be questioned and challenged. The practices just mentioned, like most of the curricula used in American schools, focus on the teaching of skills, rather than on content. They provide virtually no space for children to control either the content, pace, or the direction of their learning. The dominant American approach to curriculum planning relies on "teacher-proof" materials that remove responsibility for curriculum planning from the teachers who are trained and in the best position to assess the academic and emotional needs of the children in their charge. These materials "deskill" teachers and effectively strip from teaching the very dimensions that define it as a profession. In this light, any call for making teaching a true profession that does not directly address this issue must be seen as empty rhetoric.

Likewise, approaches to reading and writing that do not invest learners with a significant voice in the selection of what they read and write about robs them of a critical opportunity to assume important responsibilities, responsibilities citizens in a democracy must learn to exercise. Indeed, many critics have suggested that approaches to curriculum that deny a voice to teachers and students are profoundly antidemocratic. Alternative approaches that invest such responsibility in them are empowering and the means to begin establishing the foundation of a more democratic society.

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Primary responsibility for the everyday planning of the curriculum must be returned to those who know children and adult learners best: the teachers. This is not to say that parents, school boards, administrators, the state department of education, etc. will no longer contribute to decision making about curriculum. It is to say that teachers must become again a primary voice in deciding what occurs in classrooms. Teacher training institutions must work to assist teachers in assuming this critical responsibility. Meaningful content (i. e., discussion of the social and physical world, literature art, music, etc.) must be the center of the curriculum and skills must be taught in the context of the exploration of this content. Skills, after all, are merely the tools needed to unlock the worlds of literature, history, science, etc. Students also need to be given a central place in determining the nature and direction of their educations. They need opportunities to select and read real books, to write for real audiences, about things that are meaningful in their lives.

This document is a publication of the **University of Georgia Education Initiative**. Through the Education Initiative, The University of Georgia will enter into partnerships with school systems willing to experiment and take risks that will lead to substantive restructuring in the way schools operate. Central to this Initiative is our plan to link these changes in schools to a parallel restructuring of our programs for the preparation of teachers and other school professionals.

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